

Once in royal Saturn's city

Tim Leary

The pagan rites most commonly celebrated in England today are probably those of Christmas – that is, of course, if one excepts Easter. Indeed, those who encourage us to 'put Christ back into Christmas' are on shaky ground. Christ never really was in Christmas, or at any rate in the Roman festival of the Saturnalia, which was celebrated each December, and whose slot in the annual round Christmas later came to fill. Consequently, in order to form anything like a full understanding of the Christmas phenomenon, one needs not to investigate Christ, for He is rather peripheral to the story, so much as to explore the mythology and mid-winter rites of Rome.

As its name suggests, the Saturnalia was associated with the worship of Saturn. The Romans usually identified Saturn with Kronos, the father of Zeus, whose position was usurped by his son. They believed that after being overthrown, Saturn sought refuge in Italy, or Latium, a word they connected with *latere*, the Latin for 'to hide'. Having settled there, Saturn then civilised the country. Virgil tells the story:

'In those early days, in flight from the weapons of Jupiter, came Saturn from heavenly Olympus, an exile who had lost his kingdom. He brought together this wild and scattered mount ain people, gave them laws and resolved that the name of the land should be changed to Latium, since he had lain hidden within its borders.'

(*Aen.* 8.319 ff., transl. West, Penguin 1990)

Before being overthrown, Saturn was thought to have presided over a Golden Age, a time of equality, freedom, and abundance, when there was no need for laws, war was unknown, and the earth produced its fruits without the need for human toil. The Saturnalia was popularly perceived as an attempt to achieve some respite from the strain of everyday life by recalling or recreating this happy era, if only for a while.

The truth behind the introduction of Saturn worship to Italy, and the origins of the Saturnalia, is undoubtedly more complex than the myth. But we know little about it, save that there appears to have been a Capitoline temple to Saturn before Rome's foundation, and so the god's introduction must have been early, and save that Saturnalian celebrations in historical times might date from a festival ordained in 217 B.C., when the Sibylline books were consulted following Rome's defeat at Lake Trasimene during the Second Punic War. Whatever the facts behind its origins, however, the Saturnalia came to be the most

important holiday in the Roman year. Originally confined to a single day, it was extended as time went on. It lasted five days in the time of Caligula, and under Domitian we even hear of seven-day celebrations. Public sacrifices and shows were held, the law courts adjourned, business was suspended and schools were closed.

Changing party hats

In keeping with attempts to recreate the lost Golden Age of Saturn, an unusual degree of licence was permitted. The usual laws were relaxed, most notably those forbidding gambling for money, and a new legal order was adopted, that of a Saturnalian king. He was chosen by lot, and for the duration of the Saturnalia his word was law, whether, according to the 2nd-century satirical writer Lucian, to dance naked, suffer a dunking in icy water, or pick up a flute girl. The origins of this Saturnalian king are debated, but in classical times he was no more than a lord of misrule, to be compared with the merry monarch of Christmas and Twelfth Night, or even the enthronement by the mediaeval church of boy bishops; and the penalties he could impose find their parallel in the forfeits of modern festive parlour games.

Social barriers in classical Rome were clearly designated; but social barriers were unknown in Saturn's Golden Age, when all men were equal, and so, for the duration of the Saturnalia, slaves were accorded a degree of freedom. Indeed, sometimes they were even allowed to switch roles with their masters. Similar scenes can be witnessed at Christmas today in communities or organisations, like the army, where hierarchical divisions are closely observed.

In keeping with the relaxed atmosphere, the formal *toga* was discarded for a loose and comfortable garment known as the *synthesis*. In addition, the *pilleum* was worn, a hat given to slaves upon manumission to indicate their new freedom, and a hat therefore appropriate to the egalitarian nature of the holiday. We continue to wear silly hats at Christmas today.

Commercialisation of Saturnalia

A central part of the Saturnalia, as of Christmas, was the dinner which was served. A pig was traditional (compare the boar's head of the early English Christmas), and it was eaten amidst much jollity, helped not a little by the consumption of large quantities of alcohol (no change here!). At these meals, a wide variety of presents, usually small ones, would have been distributed. Often, they would have been apportioned by lot, or by tokens inscribed with riddles or jokes. We think of course of our Christmas crackers.

It was not only at dinner, however, that the Romans gave presents. While small gifts could conveniently be distributed by meal-time lotteries, larger ones would often have been delivered or presented in less complex ways. Like our Christmas presents, in fact. The usual

explanation for the presents we give at Christmas is that they recall those given to Christ by the Magi. But this is less likely to be true than a retrospective explanation engineered by members of the Christian Church anxious to distance themselves from the associations of adopted pagan practice.

Saturnalian presents were bought at a market, called the *sigillaria*, held initially in the colonnade of the Argonauts and later in that of Trajan's baths. Indeed, there is evidence that the extra two days of the Saturnalia, which extended the festival from five days to seven (see above), were devoted purely to the commercial aspect of the festival. Those earnest people who object to the commercialism of Christmas have a great weight of historical precedent against them.

Although all kinds of presents could be bought at the *sigillaria*, the market owed its name to just one variety: *sigillaria* or *sigilla* were statuettes, most commonly earthenware, but also of ivory and precious metal. Usually, the subject of these statuettes was the gods, but this was by no means always the case. The statuettes would have been given to children as dolls, or would have been placed in household shrines. Comparable are the Nativity figures which can be bought at Christmas today in the Piazza Navona in Rome, and which are placed in stables modelled from cardboard and moss.

Along with *sigilla*, the oldest and best-established variety of Saturnalian present was the candle. Lighting equipment or light-sources have been a feature of mid-winter festivals from the earliest times, symbolising the return of the sun, which can be hoped for once mid-winter is past. Candles and lights, of course, play an important part in the modern Christmas, whether to decorate Christmas trees or light up city high streets.

Other Saturnalian gifts with Christmas equivalents include sweetmeats, sporting equipment, toys, books, toiletries, and socks. The fourteenth book of Martial's epigrams is devoted to descriptions of such presents and many others, its constituent poems according with the riddles and jokes mentioned already in making comparison with Christmas crackers.

So several points of contact between the Saturnalia and Christmas have emerged. Nevertheless, the similarities which have been identified are probably sufficient to vindicate the position taken in the opening paragraph, that Christmas is essentially a pagan celebration. In consequence, therefore, next time we pull a cracker or put on a paper hat, we might possibly reflect that our actions are not so much a celebration of the birth of Christ as a primitive attempt to recreate a lost Golden Age or at least to delude ourselves with jollity in the face of life's realities, while marking the winter solstice.

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